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Decolonization of Thought:

A Critical Look into the Memorialization and Remembrance of the Ukrainian Holodomor

Maggie Donnell

Decolonization

October 27, 2018

A common misconception is that countries in the world today have surpassed the selfish desire of dominating other less-powerful countries, with the underlying belief that these countries do not have the means necessary to govern themselves. As great as it would be for this to be true, it is certainly not the case. While many believe the world powers and their former colonies are on good terms and all is well between the two, there are still areas of the world undergoing the process of decolonization. For many, this process has only just begun, as their decolonization struggle has proven to be much more systematic than previously believed. This is the story of those who suffered due to the infamous Ukrainian Holodomor. Infamous is used ironically in this case: infamous in that it was a dark period for Ukrainians under Stalin's oppressive regime but also in that few are aware of its presence in history. This has complicated matters for one who is attempting to understand their decolonization struggle.

For almost fifty years, the Soviet Union's government did everything in its power to suppress any sort of knowledge or evidence surrounding their man-made Holodomor, translated to famine, that killed millions of Ukrainians between 1932 and 1933. It was not until the years leading up to Ukraine's independence and the fall of the Soviet Union that people began discussing what actually occurred. Because many years had passed and the famine was a mystery hidden from the conscious of the people, it is still not clear what exactly the Holodomor encompassed and how it affected the people of Ukraine. This makes the conversation about their struggle difficult but even more imperative.

Before one begins to explore the ongoing decolonization struggle associated with the Ukrainian Holodomor, it is of upmost importance to first define decolonization. By definition,

decolonization is the “process by which colonies become independent of the colonizing country.”<sup>1</sup> While this sounds relatively simple in theory, the colonizing of a country can and typically does incorporate many different aspects; colonization can include, but is not limited to, economic, social, and political control.

Each of these plays a unique role in defining life within a colony and how that is perceived by the outside world. Outsiders, as previously mentioned, really had no understanding of how life was for people within Soviet Ukraine during 1932 and 1933 and the years following. So while Ukraine is physically independent of Russia today, and has been for almost three decades, they are still suffering by academics’, and really the general public’s, lack of acknowledgement of the Holodomor. For Ukrainians, their ongoing decolonization struggle is much more a decolonization of mind and thought, specifically how others remember and memorialize the Holodomor.

The Holodomor is, within itself, a topic of great contestation. There is really no consensus on what it was; some see it as a man-made famine imposed on the Ukrainians by the Soviet government, while others believe it was actually the Ukrainian’s policies and political climate that fostered an environment for such a famine to occur. While this paper is founded upon the former, a brief note will be given to those who believe in the latter. For those who follow this thought, the development of the famine of 1932 was:

*in the political failures and social upheaval in the villages... particularly*

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<sup>1</sup> Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, “Decolonization,” Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed October 18, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/decolonization>.

*during collectivization and removal of “kulaks,” the sowing campaign, and the administrative reform of the republic (1932-1933)—the transfer from the system based on the okruhy to one based on oblasts (newly created) and raions.<sup>2</sup>*

While the villages’ way of functioning may have exacerbated the conditions that allowed for the fostering of a breeding ground for the famine, this paper holds that it was Stalin’s hold on Ukraine that allowed the famine to have the effect that it did.

For much of its existence, since 1922 to be exact, Ukraine was included in the territory that comprised the Soviet Union. Therefore, any actions taken by the Soviet government affected the Ukrainians. Ukraine, for many years preceding and following the 1932-1933 famine:

*suffered close to 15 million ‘excess deaths’ from 1914 to 1948: 1.3 million during World War I; 2.3 million during the Russian Civil War and the Polish-Soviet War of the early 1920s; 4 million during the Holodomor; 300,000 during the Great Terror and annexation of western Ukraine; 6.5 during World War II; and 400,000 during the postwar famine and Stalin’s campaign against Ukrainian Nationalism.<sup>3</sup>*

While the Ukrainian deaths that occurred during World War I were not necessarily done in part by the Soviet government, it is clear that many, if not all, of the others occurred because of Stalin. Please take careful note of the increase in deaths from when Stalin took control of Ukraine, but especially of the four million deaths that occurred during the Holodomor.

It was under Stalin that territories within the Soviet Union, including Ukraine, faced incredible loss. His country was “... the most rigorously regulated and policed society in the world. Its machinery of domestic repression was much more elaborate...” so that “...6 million peasants perished in the course of Stalin’s programme of enforced industrialization.”<sup>4</sup> Of course,

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<sup>2</sup> David R. Marples, Eduard Baidaus, and Mariya Melentyeva, “Causes of the 1932 famine in soviet Ukraine: debates at the third all-Ukrainian party conference,” *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 56, no. 3/4 (2014): 292.

<sup>3</sup> Alexander J. Motyl, “Deleting the Holodomor,” *World Affairs* 173, no. 3 (2010): 26.

<sup>4</sup> Max Hastings, *Inferno: The World at War, 1939-1945* (New York: Vintage Books, 2012), 140.

to preserve his namesake, Stalin had to be sure that the deliberate starvation of his people was not attributed to his name, whether domestically or internationally. Sadly, he succeeded in doing so for many years.

This would not have been possible, though, without the aid, whether by force or by fear, of others. Stalin was beautifully deceptive in silencing those within the Soviet Union: “Inside the country the famine was never mentioned. All discussion was actively repressed; statistics were altered to hide it. The terror was so overwhelming that the silence was complete.”<sup>5</sup> If those within the country would not and did not talk about it, then who would dare have the audacity to do so?

Although a tough question to wrestle with, it establishes the foundation for why very few, if any, whether internally or externally, spoke of the Holodomor. As time continued on, and the Holodomor was to remain a thing of the distant past, many disregarded its very existence. In being this mysterious, secret event with very limited information, the Holodomor was to be a piece of Ukrainian national history that only a select few could recognize and identify with.

It was not until the Ukrainians, while establishing their independence from the Soviet Union in the early 1990’s, decided it was time to speak about this dark time in their history and see it as the core of who they are. This is when the development of a Ukrainian identity, based on the Holodomor, began to emerge.

This identity was rightly found within their history. The Ukrainians, amidst seeking sovereignty in all spheres, sought to re-envision their history within their own context, separate

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<sup>5</sup> Anne Applebaum, “How Stalin hid Ukraine’s famine from the world,” *The Atlantic*, October 13, 2017.

of the Soviet Union. They saw “...the separation of ‘their [our] own’ history from the common cultural-historical space— [as] an important element in the acquisition of political sovereignty and in cultural-political emancipation.”<sup>6</sup> For decades their history had been shared with, and maybe even better described as overshadowed, by the Soviet Union’s.

Ukrainians recognized that for others to see them as a nation, they had to establish their own status as people with a national history. To take it a step further, they also recognized the need for their own people to see themselves as such, too. When Ukraine split from the Soviet Union and began developing infrastructure within their own country, they saw how important education was, especially for the younger generations. Therefore, on two occasions in Ukrainian students’ studies, both in the fifth grade and tenth grade, curriculum included the Famine.<sup>7</sup>

No longer was the famine to be this mystical event, but rather, it was to be expressed through various mediums so that the world would take heart and acknowledge how important it is to the Ukrainian people that its occurrence in history is not forgotten. Music and social media are two that have been used the most recently.

Music is thought to be universal: where words fail, music does not. The renowned Ukrainian composer, Yevhen Stankovych, was well aware of this and thought that his abilities would be of best use to honor the victims of the Holodomor by creating his “Requiem for Holodomor victims.”<sup>8</sup> This haunting and sobering musical composition just made its debut in

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<sup>6</sup> Georgii Kas’ianov, “The Holodomor and the building of a nation.,” *Russian Social Science Review* 52, no. 3 (2011): 71.

<sup>7</sup> Jan Germen Janmaat, “History and national identity construction: the great famine in Irish and Ukrainian history textbooks,” *History of Education* 35, no. 3 (2006): 361.

<sup>8</sup> Yevhen Stankovych, Requiem for Holodomor victims. The National Choir of Ukraine “DUMKA”, 2003.

America this summer in Chicago. As explained by Maestro Andrew Koehler, conductor of the Kalamazoo Philharmonia, in the concert notes of its North American premiere, Stankovych's Requiem is "A Requiem with an unapologetic text...which does not shrink from proclaiming the truth of what happened". Furthermore, he continues, stating that "...it embodies the full human response to tragedy, moving from supplication to rage to lament to acceptance..."<sup>9</sup> Stankovych employs the compelling power of music to invoke others to acknowledge their underlying thoughts and feelings regarding the Holodomor.

Another easily identifiable way to connect with others, gain supporters, and disperse information, in which Ukrainians hope to do through their independence and decolonization struggle, is through social media like Facebook. The creation of a Facebook page entitled "Holodomor – The Ukrainian Genocide" was created with the description of "The world must know about the Ukrainian Holodomor..Stalin's Forced Famine of 7 to 10 million Ukrainians 1932-33."<sup>10</sup> These are all efforts to spread awareness about the ill-understood Ukrainian Holodomor.

The reality, though, is that despite these efforts, the Ukrainian Holodomor and the way it is remembered and memorialized is not always in their favor. This is the basis of their current decolonization struggle: the decolonization of mind and thought. Even in some instances, Russia still has some sort of influence over the way people both within Ukraine and outside of it perceive and honor the victims of the Famine.

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<sup>9</sup> Andrew Koehler, "NOTES: Stankovych's "Ukrainian Requiem," *The Ukrainian Weekly*, June 22, 2018.

<sup>10</sup> Holodomor – The Ukrainian Genocide's Facebook page.



Russia plays a sort of double-standard: much of their identity as a nation is found in their ability to maintain power over Ukraine, yet the way in which they portray Ukrainians is not all too kind. They want Ukraine and all it encompasses to be Russian, but Ukrainians are not actually allowed to possess and enjoy the perks that come with that title and identification. Even today, "...Russia seeks to suppress a people who have expressed their will to be free, to have their own voice, their own government, and their own identity".<sup>11</sup>

While Ukraine chooses to actively disregard its Soviet past, the Russians cannot seem to accept this defeat and humiliation. The tension between these two is certainly not over and does not seem to be in the near future. As recent as 2014, "...conflict has raged between pro-Russian forces and the Ukrainian government in Eastern Ukraine."<sup>12</sup> The same sort of overlook and apathy by others, and repression of the Russian government, that wreaked havoc and depleted morale of the Ukrainians during the Holodomor is equally, maybe even more so, present today.

Less than one month ago, some within Russia who wished to honor the victims of the Holodomor were banned from doing so, even though they have been afforded the opportunity to do so for many years.<sup>13</sup> Assumingly, based on the current political climate and because it potentially casts an unfavorable light on the beloved Stalin, the memorial was not allowed this year even after compromises were given.

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<sup>11</sup> "History, identity and Holodomor denial: Russia's continued assault on Ukraine," *Euromaidan Press*, November 11, 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Adelaide Mena, "The horror of Ukraine's forgotten famine still casts a shadow today," *Crux*, March 6, 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Agence France-Presse, "Moscow bans ceremony honouring victims of Stalin's terror," *The Guardian*, October 19, 2018.

An important question to ask, in light of all that has been shared, is how are memorials and representations of the Holodomor affected by current attitudes? Much of it stems from the disagreement on the genocide question: was the Ukrainian Holodomor a genocide or not? Although it seems of little importance, the way in which one defines the Holodomor greatly impacts one's belief in whether it is worth representing through memorials.

Especially in the Western world, the term genocide tends to be highly politicized and debated.<sup>14</sup> The qualifications for earning the status of a genocide is unclear, yet receiving such a title earns a sort of respect from others. Without this sort of "rite of passage", in the eyes of others, the Holodomor, or any event of great magnitude, loses any sort of meaning. For many, any event that occurred in the past must be one that affected large numbers of people directly; many times, the implications of the event are not included in the judgment. This is difficult in terms of the Holodomor, considering the effects of it are almost as devastating and damaging as it was back then. It is almost painfully comical that an event must reach such great proportions, as the term genocide alludes to, before one is willing to recognize it as an atrocity worth memorializing and remembering.

However, it is unfair for the greater world powers to make a judgment call on whether the Holodomor was a genocide when it was not "...until 2006 that the Holodomor...was recognized in the Ukrainian parliament as a deliberate act of genocide against the country's people."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Rebekah Moore, "'A crime against humanity arguably without parallel in European history': genocide and the 'politics' of victimhood in western narratives of the Ukrainian Holodomor," *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 58, no. 3 (2012): 367.

<sup>15</sup> "Holodomor Victims Memorial," *Atlas Obscura*.

Technically, the idea of the Holodomor being a genocide is a relatively new concept to them, so it most certainly is not at the forefront of others' minds.

With the approaching 85<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Holodomor, though, that may be changing. Pressure has begun building, especially on and within the United States, to recognize the Holodomor as a genocide. At a recent press conference, Ukraine's Ambassador to the United States, Valeriy Chaly, said, "In 2018, the U.S. Congress can adopt a resolution on the recognition of the Holodomor (Famine) of 1932-1933 a genocide of the Ukrainian people."<sup>16</sup>

While no official proclamation has been made to date, it is evident that those within the United States are pushing for recognition of the Holodomor. A Twitter page entitled "HolodomorAware" constantly posts updates on recent activities of state legislatures that have issued resolutions regarding remembrance of the Holodomor.<sup>17</sup> It will certainly be interesting to see which states will join the cause and how this will affect the national government's actions.

Overall, while advancements have been made in the Ukrainian decolonization of mind and though regarding perceptions of the Holodomor, there is still much to be accomplished. For now, Russia is still exerting quite a bit of power of the Ukrainian people, and the way in which the world not only defines the Holodomor but also remembers and memorializes it will need to be addressed. It is important to celebrate the strides that have been made, there is still much to be done before Ukrainian can officially be liberated from colonialism.

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<sup>16</sup> "U.S. Congress can recognize Holodomor as genocide this year – Ambassador Chaly," *Ukrinform*, August 21, 2018.

<sup>17</sup> HolodomorAware, Twitter Post, October 26, 2018.

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